

Kenneth Helphand

Interpretive Interventions



Memorial sign in San Francisco, CA. Photo by the author.

Landscape preservation is also the act of contemporary design. In the reuse and redesign of places, there are no new sites, for all are historic. Interpretation, the explication of places and phenomena is a fundamental aspect of preservation. Typically it is viewed as a final design layer, that offers explanation or routing, but at its best it offers an added engagement with the place. However, design itself is also fundamentally an interpretive act. The determination of programmatic elements and composition in terms of form, scale, dimensions and materials, all of these choices are acts of interpretation. If conceived as such, they can add additional layers of meaning and richness to any design. There is also art that takes as its theme or subject the interpretation of places and phenomena, art that explicitly and implicitly attempts to deal with or question the relationship between the natural world and the world of culture. Historically, this is one of the fundamental themes and narratives of garden history itself.

The cross-fertilization of disciplines often leads to new insights, where the conscious overlap of method and idea can act as a catalyst to

insight and ideation. This article describes examples of combining methods most often associated with the realm of contemporary landscape artistry with those of landscape interpretation. This uncommon chemical combination might help us see opportunities in the design of sites not readily apparent. The ideas build upon the author's concept of Magic Markers and Ronald Fleming's PlaceMakers. Magic Markers is a proposal for historical markers which go beyond the limits of descriptive plaques and a didactic sensibility. They are intended to cultivate in the viewer and visitor a sensibility of historical imagination, engaging them in the place in an unexpected fashion, offering a certain shock of recognition to their awareness of the place.¹ In similar fashion, PlaceMakers focus on the role of public art to foster local identity and a sense of where one resides in both space and time.²

For example, there are markers in the landscape which take the graphic conventions of mapping into the landscape. Thus, as American and Canadian roads cut across the 45th parallel there are highway signs alerting drivers that they are "Halfway between the North Pole and the equator." Lines demarcate local, state and

international borders, and the prime meridian in Greenwich, England can be stepped across. There are vertical sections such as flood markers which mark the levels of floods. In northern California some of these are found high atop telephone poles. There are maps and pictorial images placed on site which depict past events in direct comparison to the existing site. There are time lines and chronologies that one can walk. In 1984, University of Oregon students painted bar graphs of the federal budget on the main walkway through campus. The graphic depiction,

"Halfway between the North Pole and the Equator." Photo by the author.



*Federal Budget,
University of
Oregon, 1984.*



which went on for blocks, showed the dramatic discrepancies in the allocation of economic resources.

Artists in the past generation have been creating works which heighten our spatial and temporal awareness and consciousness. There is a resonance between their work and that of landscape architects which is equally directed at understanding our position in space and the transformation of spaces over time. The vocabulary of marking and interpretation can be expanded through techniques such as mapping, modeling, lines on the land, on-site sections, site visualization, chronologies, displacements,

*"Nieuw
Amsterdam" by
Eric Arctander,
1980.*



and time land-
scapes.

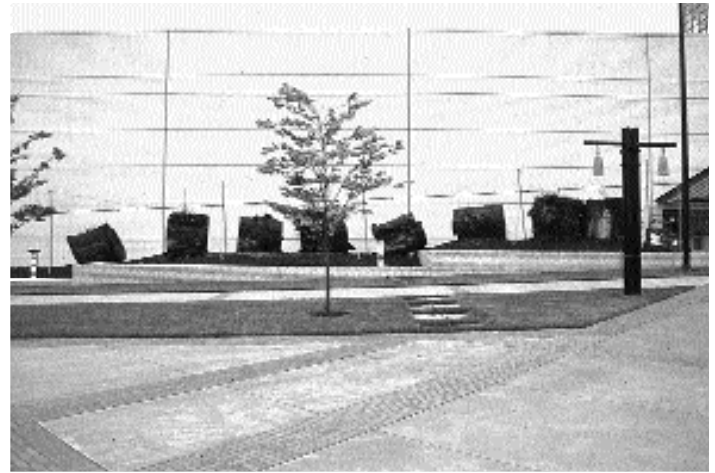
Conventional historical markers often deal with the dynamics of nature and culture, and certain artists explicitly deal with those interactions, particularly within the urban landscape. In 1980 Eric Arctander painted two parallel lines at the tip of Manhattan. Entitled "Nieuw Amsterdam" this full-scale map depicted the original

shoreline of the end of the island. Walking through Battery Park, cutting across streets and through buildings it dramatized the landscape history of the filling in the harbor. Alan Sonfist has created a series of "Time Landscapes" such as his 1978 version in Lower Manhattan, which is a landscape restoration of the pre-Colonial forest. Buster Simpson's 1991 "Host Analog" in Portland, Oregon is a landscape displacement. A downed Douglas fir tree from the forested Cascade mountains was installed in front of the city's convention center. There, an irrigation system provides mist to continue the tree's natural function as nurse log for future plant growth. Over time a fragment of the forest is emerging in the urban landscape. The 1991 "Shore Viewpoints" by Gloria Bornstein and Donald Fels were a series of markers placed adjacent to an official set of historical points of interest markers along the Seattle waterfront. The text of the new markers was a commentary on the old, thus the process of understanding the "official" depiction of history (dating from the late '50s and early '60s) was placed in direct contrast with revisionist and alternative viewpoints. The waterfront began to function as source material for a museum without walls in a landscape research library.

In 1994, a landscape architecture design studio at the University of Oregon investigated a mile-long segment of the Old Columbia River Highway (from Tanner Creek to Eagle Creek), abandoned since 1937. It is currently in the process of conversion by the Oregon Department of Transportation into a recreational and bicycle trail, a rare highway-to-trail project. With the intention of involving students in the act of design interpretation, they were asked to design

*"Host Analog" by
Buster Simpson,
1991.*

a series of interpretive interventions which were executed in a weekend workshop. The question was how to intervene on this segment of the Columbia River Highway in such a way as to heighten the awareness, appreciation, and experience of the historic landscape character. The work was all temporary and dismantled after our visit and executed on-site at full scale. The methodologies included re-photography, framing, narratives, layering, revealing, and illumination, all intended to cultivate one's historic imagination and address fundamental questions of cultural impacts in a dramatic and protected natural landscape.



*"Shore
Viewpoints" by
Gloria Bornstein
and Donald Fels,
1991.*

Chris Peterson's intervention combined archeology and surgery. In a section of the high-

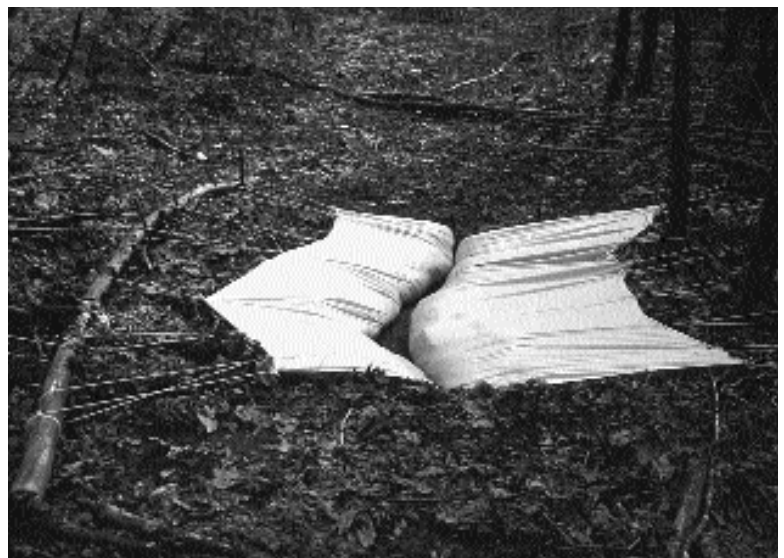
of "frames" in the landscape. They focused one's attention on the grand and spectacular views of the gorge, as the highway was designed to do, but also on landscape fragments, such as the bark of a tree. Accompanying each picture was a question for viewers directed at understanding the changing landscape over time, such as questions about trees which had matured, the giant lake created by the construction of the Bonneville Dam, and the gorge's geologic history.

Other interventions included staking out the original road configuration with poles and surveyors tape where it had been obliterated, stenciling old Model T tracks on the earth, the etching of hand prints by the careful removal of moss from highway guardrails, the rope "marriage" of the highway to surrounding trees (inspired by the marriage of rocks in the Japanese landscape), the installation of stone walls, inflated bags compressed beneath the new roadbed as it rode over the original surface, and the installation of pieces of old cars which visitors could sit in and imagine driving down the



way now under a foot of soil he made an incision into the earth which revealed the almost pristine roadway beneath. The earth was treated as alive, with sterile sheets holding back its "body" to expose the underlying tissue. Sarah Cantine fabricated a series of boxes which told the story of the highway from the perspective of an imagined female user of 75 years ago. Each box displayed an artifact such as white gloves, a watch, a mirror, book, and toothbrush. Their placement in the landscape, on railings or the roadbed, forced the viewer to both carefully examine the site and the boxed artifacts while mentally constructing an imagined narrative of the owner. Yutaka Tajima installed a series

*"Incision" by Chris
Peterson, 1994.*



road. For the participants the impact of the event and the works was dramatic. The design of the interventions encouraged an approach to interpretation which was subtle, multi-layered, and even a bit enigmatic, as they added an additional layer to this landscape's temporal collage. All of the interventions broke down the artificial and spurious division between "natural" and "cultural" history and preservation.

Notes

- ¹ Helphand, Kenneth, "Magic Markers." *Yearbook in Landscape Architecture: Historic Preservation*, Richard Austin, et. al., eds., New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1983. pp. 95-102.
- ² Fleming, Ronald Lee and Renata Von Tscharnier, *Placemakers*. Cambridge: The Townscape Institute, 1981.

Kenneth Helphand, FASLA, is Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Oregon.



"Boxes" by Sarah Cantine. Gloves on a stone guardrail; book in a box; hand mirror in a box.



*"Frames" by Yutaka
Tajima, 1994.*

